

**Switch to 10-digit dialing may have been premature**  
*Square Deal/by Robin Washington*

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Eight months after Eastern Massachusetts callers were forced to dial 10 digits to accommodate new area codes, the Bay State's largest phone company acknowledges it has yet to issue a single home or business line using the new numbers.

Beginning in April, callers were required to dial 10 digits to complete any call in the 617, 781, 508 and 978 area codes, which would be "overlaid" by new 857, 339, 774 and 351 codes, respectively.

Verizon and the state Department of Telecommunications and Energy, which mandated the changes, said the overlay codes were needed because numbers in the old codes were running out.

But now the company says it's barely broken the seal on its new pack of numbers.

"Verizon has not in fact issued any new numbers (on land lines)," spokesman Bob Noble said. "Our cellular unit has issued a number of them. It's not a vast number but it's some."

He didn't offer specific numbers.

Verizon said the new area codes were necessary because regulators previously allotted numbers to firms in 10,000 number blocks.

Noble attributed the underutilization to the economic downturn and a rise in alternative communications, such as broadband.

But critics say the result is callers were rushed into dialing extra digits for no good reason.

"There was no need for it. It was all smoke and mirrors," said state Sen. Charles Shannon (D-Winchester), who has filed several bills for alternative area code distribution.

Douglas Williams of Boston's Economics and Technology Inc., a telecommunications research firm, called the cache of unused numbers "amazing."

"Verizon stomped and screamed about having access to another 32 million telephone numbers and they haven't assigned one," he said, adding he has yet to meet anyone with an 857 area code.

Yet some cell phone users have been assigned the new codes, albeit unwillingly.

"It's killing my business," said Rich Rosen of Commonwealth Paging in Park Square, who said unlike Verizon, AT&T and VoiceStream have few 617 numbers left and offer 857 instead.

"I tell them their number will be 857 and they say 'What? I don't want that,'" he said.

Area codes 781, 508 and 978 are available, however, which Rosen's customer Phil Carver of Dorchester would prefer.

``I'd just get 781," he said.

``If you got an 857, people would be asking, `is that one of those 1-900 numbers or something?' "

Though Verizon denies it, Williams said the fact that Verizon has issued few of the new numbers suggests the company is hoarding 617s to force undesirable codes on its competitors. ``The big reason why Verizon pressed so hard for four additional overlays was that they said there wasn't time to implement alternative numbering methods that would have precluded the need for 10-digit dialing. Clearly that has not come to pass," he said.

Shannon said the switch to 10-digit dialing could be reconsidered. ``If enough people are up in arms, we might be able to."

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